

How
Lincoln Won the War
with
Metaphors

by

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The Eighth Annual R. Gerald McMurtry Lecture

DELIVERED AT FORT WAYNE, INDIANA, 1985

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is a memorial tribute to the life and contributions of Abraham Lincoln. § The lecture series honors Dr. R. Gerald McMurtry, the second director of the Library and Museum. Each year a distinguished Lincoln scholar will be invited to Fort Wayne to present a paper on some aspect of the Lincoln theme.



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The eighth annual R. Gerald McMurtry Lecture
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in Fort Wayne, Indiana, on May 9, 1985.

IN AN ESSAY on the reasons for Confederate defeat in the Civil War, the astute historian David M. Potter made a striking assertion: "If the Union and Confederacy had exchanged presidents with one another, the Confederacy might have won its independence." Is this rather dramatic conclusion justified? Most historians would probably agree with Potter's general point that Davis's shortcomings as a leader played a role in Confederate defeat. They would also agree that one of Davis's principal failures was an inability to communicate effectively with other Confederate leaders and with the Southern people. As Potter put it, Davis "seemed to think in abstractions and to speak in platitudes."¹

Lincoln, by contrast, most emphatically did *not* think in abstractions and rarely spoke in platitudes. We have not had another President—except perhaps Franklin D. Roosevelt—who expressed himself in such a clear, forceful, logical, easy-to-understand manner as Lincoln. It is no coincidence that Lincoln and Roosevelt were great War Presidents who led the United States to its most decisive victories in its most important wars. Their pre-eminent quality as leaders was an ability to communicate the meaning and purpose of these wars in a comprehensible, inspiring manner that helped mobilize and energize their people to make the sacrifices necessary for victory. By contrast, Jefferson Davis, as another historian has recently concluded, failed to do a good job "in eliciting the enthusiasm and energies of the people."²

Wherein lay Lincoln's advantage over Davis in this matter?

It certainly did not derive from a better education. Davis had received one of the best educations that money could buy in his day. He attended one "college" in Kentucky and another in Mississippi, which were really secondary schools or academies; he went to Transylvania University in Kentucky, which was one of the best genuine colleges west of the Appalachians at that time; and he graduated from the military academy at West Point, the best American school for engineering as well as for military science in that era. From his education Davis acquired excellent training in the classics, in rhetoric, logic, literature, and science. He should have been a superb communicator. And in many respects he was, by the standards of the time. He could write with vigorous logic, turn a classical phrase, quote the leading authorities on many a subject, and close with a rhetorical flourish.

Lincoln of course had only a year or less of formal schooling in the typical rote-learning "blab schools" of the day, schooling that he obtained, as he later put it, "by littles"—a month here, a few weeks there, spread out over a period of a few years. Lincoln was basically a self-taught man. Of course he later read law, which along with the practice of that profession helped to give him an ability to write and speak with clarity, a skill in logical analysis, and a knack for finding exactly the right word or phrase to express his meaning. But Jefferson Davis also possessed most of these skills of expository writing and speaking. So we are still left with the question: wherein lay Lincoln's superiority?

The answer may be found in a paradox: perhaps the defects in Lincoln's education proved a benefit. Instead of spending years inside the four walls of a classroom, Lincoln worked on frontier dirt farms most of his youth, he split rails, he rafted down the Mississippi on a flatboat, he surveyed land, he worked in a store where he learned to communicate with the farmers

and other residents of a rural community. He grew up close to the rhythms of nature, of wild beasts and farm animals, of forest and running water, of seasons and crops and of people who got their meager living from the land. These things, more than books, furnished his earliest education. They infused his speech with the images of nature. And when he turned to books, what were his favorites? They were the King James Bible, *Aesop's Fables*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Shakespeare's plays. What do these four have in common? They are rich in figurative language—in allegory, parable, fable, metaphor—in words and stories that say one thing but mean another, in images that illustrate something more profound than their surface appearance.

Here lies one of the secrets of Lincoln's success as a communicator: his skill in the use of figurative language, of which metaphor is the most common example. We all use metaphors every day. We tell someone to stop beating around the bush; we say that we have too many irons in the fire; we express a desire to get to the heart of the matter; we worry about fitting square pegs in round holes; we see light at the end of the tunnel; and so on. The best metaphors are those that use a simple, concrete image to illustrate a complex and perhaps abstract concept, thereby giving life and tangible meaning to something that might otherwise escape comprehension. A good metaphor can turn on that (metaphorical) light bulb in our minds and make clear what had previously been dark.

Many of the metaphors that we use in everyday speech, like most of those I just mentioned, are "dead" metaphors—that is, they are so common that we often do not realize that they *are* metaphors, and they thus lose their power to evoke a vivid image in our minds. Sometimes a dead metaphor can be brought back to life by being given a new twist: for example, somebody once asked Groucho Marx, "Are you a man or a mouse?" He answered, "Throw me a piece of cheese and you'll find out."

One of the first things that strikes a student of Lincoln's writings is his frequent use of images and figurative language. His speeches and letters abound with metaphors. Many of them are extraordinarily well-chosen and apt; they have the power to turn on the light bulb in the reader's mind. By contrast, Jefferson Davis's prose is almost devoid of metaphors or images of any kind. It is relentlessly literal. It is formal, precise, logical, but also stiff, cold, and abstract. I recently spent an afternoon reading through many of Davis's wartime letters and speeches. They contain a good deal of anger and bitterness toward Yankees and toward Davis's critics and adversaries within the Confederacy, but only a very few metaphors, and those quite dead—references to sowing the seeds of discontent and thereby harvesting defeat, and the like. A similar amount of time with Lincoln's writings and speeches would discover at least four score and seven metaphors. To be sure, a number of them are dead. Lincoln complained of dealing with people who had axes to grind; he said more than once that he wanted everyone to have a fair start in the race of life; he referred to the ship of state and its navigational problems during his presidency; and so on.

But like Groucho Marx, Lincoln could neatly turn a dead metaphor into a live one. In his first message to a special session of Congress that met three months after the war began, Lincoln critically reviewed the long and, as he put it, sophistic attempt by Southern leaders to legitimize their actions by arguments for state sovereignty and the constitutional right of secession. "With rebellion thus sugar-coated," said the President, "they have been drugging the public mind of their section for more than thirty years," and this war was the result. Here Lincoln injected life into a rather tired metaphor, "sugar-coated," and used it to clinch his point in a vivid, easily comprehensible way. This occasion also gave Lincoln an opportunity to define his philosophy of communication with the public. When the government printer

set the message in type he objected to the phrase about sugar-coating the rebellion. "You have used an undignified expression in the message," the printer told the President. "A message to Congress [is] a different affair from a speech at a mass-meeting in Illinois. . . . The messages [become] a part of history, and should be written accordingly. . . . I would alter the structure of that, if I were you." Lincoln replied with a twinkle in his eye: "That word expresses precisely my idea, and I am not going to change it. The time will never come in this country when the people won't know exactly what *sugar-coated* means!"³ Lincoln was right; people knew exactly what he meant then, and the metaphor retains its pithiness today.

Lincoln used a different but equally expressive metaphor to describe the threat of secession on another important occasion, his speech at Cooper Institute in New York in February 1860, a speech that gave him great visibility among Eastern Republicans and helped launch him toward the presidential nomination three months later. This time he discussed Southern warnings to the North of the dire consequences if a Republican president was elected. "In that supposed event," said Lincoln directing his words to the South, "you say, you will destroy the Union; and then, you say, the great crime of having destroyed it will be upon us! That is cool. A highwayman holds a pistol to my ear, and mutters through his teeth, 'Stand and deliver, or I shall kill you, and then you will be a murderer!'"⁴

No one could fail to understand Lincoln's point. And through his whole life one of his main concerns was that everyone understand exactly what he was saying. A colleague who praised this quality once asked Lincoln where his concern with exact clarity came from. "Among my earliest recollections," replied Lincoln, "I remember how, when a mere child, I used to get irritated when anybody talked to me in a way I could not understand. I don't think I ever got angry at anything else in my life. . . . I can

remember going to my little bedroom, after hearing the neighbors talk of an evening with my father, and spending the night walking up and down, and trying to make out what was the exact meaning of some of their, to me, dark sayings. I could not sleep . . . when I got on such a hunt after an idea, until I had caught it; and when I thought I had got it, I was not satisfied . . . until I had put it in language plain enough, as I thought, for any boy I knew to comprehend. This was a kind of passion with me, and it has stuck by me.”⁵

Many contemporaries testified to this Lincolnian passion, and to his genius for using everyday metaphors to achieve it. Francis Carpenter, the artist who spent six months at the White House off and on during 1864 painting a picture of Lincoln and his Cabinet, noted that the President’s “lightest as well as his most powerful thought almost invariably took on the form of a figure in speech, which drove the point *home*, and *clinched* it, as few abstract reasoners are able to do.” Lincoln’s Attorney General Edward Bates made the same point: “The character of the President’s mind is such that his thought habitually takes on this form of illustration, by which the point he wishes to enforce is invariably brought home with a strength and clearness impossible in hours of abstract argument.”⁶

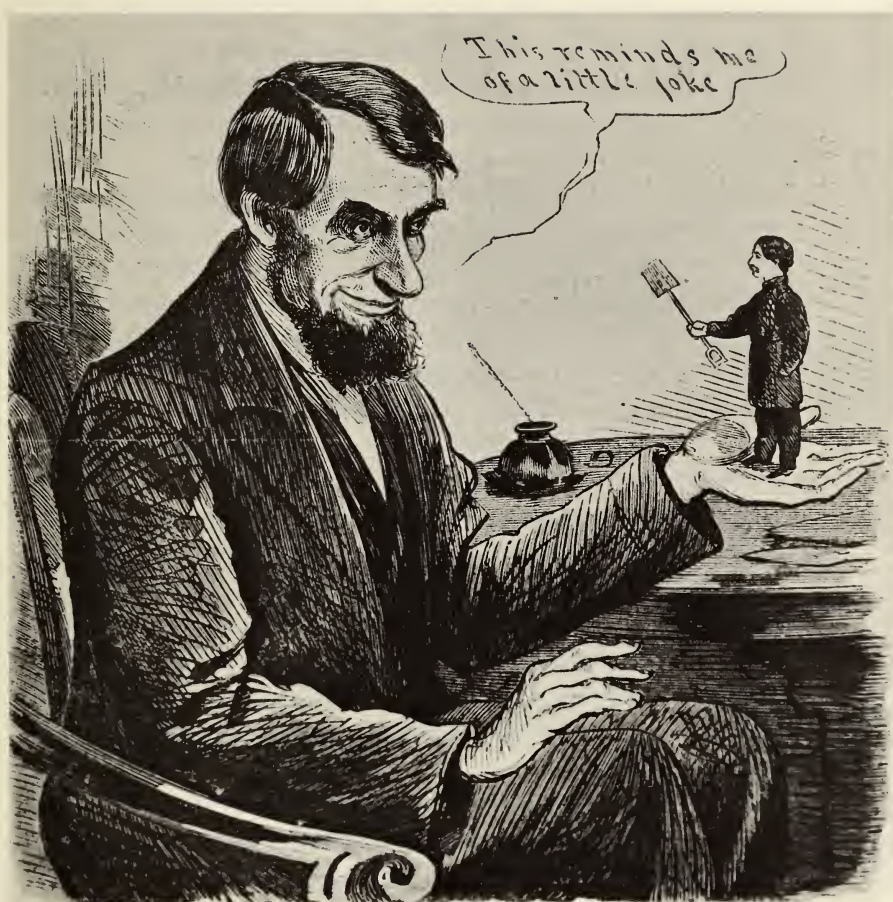
Lincoln of course was also famous for telling stories. Many of them were parables intended to make or illustrate a point; and a parable is an extended metaphor. “It is not the story itself,” Lincoln once said, “but its purpose, or effect, that interests me.”⁷ When Lincoln said, “Now that reminds me of a story,” his listeners knew that they could expect a parable. Take for example this story that Lincoln told soon after he had gotten rid of his controversial Secretary of War Simon Cameron. Since some other Cabinet members had also made enemies among one faction or another, a delegation of politicians called on the President and advised him that this might be a good time to make a

wholesale change in the Cabinet. Lincoln shook his head and replied, "This reminds of of a story. When I was a boy I knew a farmer named Joe Wilson who was proud of his prize chickens. But he started to lose some of them to raids by skunks on the henhouse. One night he heard a loud cackling from the chickens and crept out with his shotgun to find a half-dozen of the black and white critters running in and out of the shed. Thinking to clean out the whole tribe, he put a double charge in the gun and fired away. Somehow he hit only one, and the rest scampered off." At this point in the story, Lincoln would act it out by holding his nose and screwing up his face in a pained expression, while he continued. The neighbors asked Joe why he didn't follow up the skunks and kill the rest. "Blast it," said Joe, "it was eleven weeks before I got over killin' *one*. If you want any more skirmishing in that line you can just do it yourselves!"⁸

Nobody could fail to get Lincoln's point. But not everyone approved of his habit of telling stories—some of which were a good bit more earthy than this one. Some people considered it undignified for the President of the United States to carry on in such a fashion. But Lincoln had a reply for them, as related by Chauncey DePew, a prominent lawyer, railroad president, and New York Republican leader. "I heard him tell a great many stories," said DePew, "many of which would not do exactly for the drawing room, but for the person he wished to reach, and the object he desired to accomplish with the individual, the story did more than any argument could have done. He once said to me, in reference to some sharp criticism which had been made upon his story-telling: . . . 'I have found in the course of a long experience that common people'—and, repeating it—'common people, take them as they run, are more easily influenced and informed through the medium of a broad illustration than in any other way, and as to what the hypercritical few may think, I don't care.'"⁹

This was something that Jefferson Davis never understood. He would never be caught telling a story about skunks to make a point about political timing and leadership. He did not have Lincoln's concern for reaching the common people or his knack for doing so. Lincoln was especially fond of animal metaphors and parables, as in the case of the skunk story. This derived in part from his own rural background. It also undoubtedly derived from the many boyhood hours he spent with *Aesop's Fables*. During one of those hours his cousin Dennis Hanks said to him: "Abe, them yarns is all lies." Lincoln looked up for a moment, and replied: "Mighty darn good lies, Denny."¹⁰ And of course as an adult Lincoln knew that these "lies," these fables about animals, provided an excellent way to communicate with a people who were still close to their rural roots and understood the idioms of the forest and barnyard.

Some of Lincoln's most piquant animal metaphors occurred in his comments about or communications with commanding generals during the war. On one occasion, when General George B. McClellan clamored for more reinforcements and typically understated his own strength while overstating that of the enemy, Lincoln, who had already reinforced McClellan generously and knew that Union forces outnumbered the Confederates, said in exasperation that sending troops to McClellan was like shoveling flies across the barnyard—most of them never seemed to get there. Later on, when Joseph Hooker had become commander of the Army of the Potomac, Lincoln visited him at the front. Hooker boasted that he had built this force into "the finest army on the planet." He added that he hoped God Almighty would have mercy on Bobby Lee because he, Joe Hooker, would have none. Lincoln listened to this and commented that "the hen is the wisest of all the animal creation because she never cackles until the egg is laid."¹¹ And to be sure, it was Lee who laid the egg by beating Hooker decisively at Chancellors-



Harper's Weekly used Lincoln's characteristic introduction of one of his anecdotes to make fun of "Little Mac," George B. McClellan.

ville and afterwards invading the North in the campaign that led to Gettysburg. As Lee began to move north, Hooker proposed to cross the Rappahannock River and attack his rear. Lincoln disapproved with these words in a telegram to Hooker: "I would not take any risk of being entangled upon the river, like an ox jumped half over a fence, and liable to be torn by dogs, front and rear, without a fair chance to gore one way or kick the other." Napoleon himself could not have given better tactical advice or phrased it half so well. A week later, when the Confederate invasion force was strung out over nearly a hundred miles of Virginia roads, Lincoln telegraphed Hooker: "If the head of Lee's army is at Martinsburg and the tail of it on the Plank road between Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, the animal must be very slim somewhere. Could you not break him?"¹² But Hooker seemed reluctant to fight Lee again, so Lincoln replaced him with George Meade who won the battle of Gettysburg but proved to be cautious and defensive afterward.

Thus in 1864 Lincoln brought to the East his most successful commander, Ulysses S. Grant, to become General-in-Chief. In a private conference with Grant soon after he arrived in Washington, Lincoln referred to the military situation and told Grant he could best illustrate what he wanted to say by a story. There was once a great war among the animals, said the President, and one side had a great difficulty finding a commander who had enough confidence in himself to fight. Finally they found a monkey, by the name of Jocko, who said he could command the army if his tail could be made a little longer. So the other animals found more tail and spliced it onto Jocko's. He looked at it admiringly, but said he thought he needed just a little more. So they found some more and spliced it on. This process was repeated many times until Jocko's tail was so long that when he coiled it around it filled the whole room. Still he called for more tail, and they kept adding by coiling it around his shoulders and then around

his whole body until he suffocated to death. Grant understood the point; unlike McClellan and other generals, he would not keep calling for more troops as an excuse for not fighting.¹³

Instead, the new General-in-Chief worked out a plan for the two main Union armies, in Virginia and Georgia, to advance simultaneously against the two principal Confederate armies while smaller Union forces elsewhere pinned down Confederate detachments to prevent them from reinforcing the main armies. This was the kind of coordinated offensive that Lincoln had been urging on his generals for two years, and he was delighted finally to have a commander who would do it. Lincoln's expressive description of the auxiliary role of the smaller armies on the periphery was: "Those not skinning can hold a leg."¹⁴ Grant liked this phrase so much that he used it in his own dispatches.

Later on, when Grant had besieged Lee's army at Petersburg while Sherman was marching through Georgia and South Carolina destroying everything in his path, Lincoln described Union strategy in this fashion: "Grant has the bear by the hind leg while Sherman takes off the hide." On another occasion Lincoln changed the metaphor in an official telegram to Grant: "I have seen your dispatch expressing your unwillingness to break your hold where you are. Neither am I willing. Hold on with a bulldog gripe, and chew & choke, as much as possible."¹⁵ In the end it was Grant's chewing and choking while Sherman took off the hide that won the war.

The principal cause of that war was slavery and one of its main consequences was the abolition of slavery. This peculiar institution gave rise to many Lincolnian metaphors, animal and otherwise. One of them was a metaphor of snakes and children that he used in several speeches during his tour of New England in the late winter of 1860. The central tenet of the Republican party's policy was to restrict the spread of slavery into new territories while pledging not to interfere with it in states where it

Executive Mansion,

"Ulysses"

Washington, August 17, 1864.

Lieut. Gen. Grant
City Point, Va.

I have seen your despatch expressing your unwillingness to break your holes when you are neither ~~an~~ I willing. Hold on with a bull-dog grip, and chew & choke, as much as possible.

A. Lincoln

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President Lincoln encourages General Ulysses S. Grant with a metaphor. (Photograph courtesy of the National Archives)

already existed and where, of course, it was protected by the Constitution. Lincoln considered slavery a moral wrong and a social evil. He hoped that the South would eventually take steps to end it voluntarily and peacefully. In the meantime, he said, we must not introduce this evil where it does not now exist. "If I saw a venomous snake crawling in the road," said Lincoln in illustration of his point, "any man would say I might seize the nearest stick and kill it; but if I found that snake in bed with my children, that would be another question. I might hurt the children more than the snake, and it might bite them. . . . But if there was a bed newly made up, to which the children were to be taken, and it was proposed to take a batch of young snakes and put them there with them, I take it no man would say there was any question how I ought to decide. . . . The new Territories are the newly made bed to which our children are to go, and it lies with the nation to say whether they shall have snakes mixed up with them or not."¹⁶

In our day of 30-second political spot commercials on television, this metaphor seems long and involved. But Lincoln's audiences understood it perfectly and appreciated it boisterously. The stenographic report of this speech at New Haven indicates prolonged applause, laughter, and cheering as he spun out the metaphor. A professor of rhetoric at Yale was so taken with Lincoln's speech that he followed him to another town to hear him speak again and then gave a lecture on Lincoln's techniques to his class. After Lincoln spoke at Norwich, Connecticut, the town's leading clergyman happened to travel on the same train with Lincoln next day and talked with him, praising his style, "especially your illustrations, which were romance and pathos, and fun and logic all welded together. That story about the snakes, for example . . . was at once queer and comical, and tragic and argumentative. It broke through all the barriers of a man's previous opinions and prejudices at a crash, and blew up

the citadel of his false theories before he could know what had hurt him.”¹⁷

Lincoln used a number of other metaphors to describe slavery, including that of a cancer which must be prevented from spreading lest it kill the body politic. His best-known slavery metaphor formed the central theme of the most famous speech he gave before the Civil War—the House Divided address in 1858, which set the keynote for his senatorial campaign against Stephen Douglas. Here the house was a metaphor for the Union, which had been divided against itself by slavery and could not continue to be so divided forever without collapsing. Therefore the Republicans wanted to stop the further spread of slavery as a first step toward what Lincoln called its “ultimate extinction.” This metaphor of a house divided became probably the single most important image of the relationship between slavery and the Union, and remains so yet today. It provided an instant mental picture of what Republicans stood for. It also helped provoke the South into secession when Lincoln was elected President, because no matter how much Lincoln professed his intention to tolerate slavery where it already existed, had not this Black Republican Yankee also called slavery a moral wrong and looked forward to its ultimate extinction?

In that same speech, Lincoln elaborated the house metaphor to illustrate another of the Republican party’s favorite themes—that the Democrats were dominated by a “slave power conspiracy” to expand the institution of bondage over the whole country. “When we see a lot of framed timbers,” said Lincoln, “different portions of which we know have been gotten out at different times and places by different workmen—Stephen, Franklin, Roger and James, for instance—and when we see these timbers joined together, and see they exactly make the frame of a house . . . we find it impossible not to *believe* that Stephen and Franklin and Roger and James all understood one

another from the beginning, and all worked upon a common *plan* or *draft*.”¹⁸ The point of this rather elaborate metaphor seems obscure today. But Lincoln’s audience knew exactly what he was talking about. The four men he named were Stephen Douglas, leader of the Democratic party, Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan, the previous and current Presidents of the United States, both Democrats, and Roger Taney, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, also a Democrat. The house for which each of them separately framed timbers, but with a secret understanding among themselves that made everything fit together, was a conspiracy to expand slavery. The timbers were the Kansas-Nebraska Act that repealed the Missouri Compromise and made possible the expansion of slavery north of latitude 36° 30’ where it had previously been prohibited; the Dred Scott decision that legalized slavery in all territories; the Democratic pledge to acquire Cuba as a new slave territory; and other items.

After the Civil War broke out, Lincoln’s main problem—next to winning the war—was what to do about slavery. And by the second year of war the slavery issue became bound up with the fate of the Union itself as Lincoln gradually came to the conclusion that he could not win the war without striking down slavery.

In his public and private communications concerning slavery during the war, Lincoln used a number of telling metaphors and similes. His first effort was to persuade the loyal border states to accept a policy of gradual, compensated emancipation. This proposal, he said in an appeal to the people of the border states in May 1862, “makes common cause for a common object, casting no reproaches on any. It acts not the pharisee. The change it contemplates would come gently as the dews of heaven, not rending or wrecking anything. Will you not embrace it?”¹⁹ When the border states did not respond, Lincoln shifted from a

stance of soft blandishment to one of blunt warning. In July 1862 he called border-state congressmen to the White House. By then the war had taken a harder turn. Republican congressmen had passed a bill to confiscate the property of rebels against the government, including their slave property. Lincoln himself had just about decided to issue an emancipation proclamation to apply to the Confederate states. The impact of these measures was bound to spill over into the Unionist border states. Slaves there were already emancipating themselves by running away to Union army lines. In these circumstances Lincoln now told border-state congressmen that his plan of gradual emancipation with compensation from the federal government was the best they could get. Otherwise, as the war continued to escalate in intensity, "the institution in your states will be extinguished by mere friction and abrasion."²⁰ The image of friction and abrasion was a most appropriate one, but it left the border-state congressmen unmoved. Most of them voted against Lincoln's offer—and of course three more years of war did extinguish slavery by friction and abrasion, in the border states as well as the Confederate states.

After his unsuccessful appeal to the border states, Lincoln made up his mind to issue an emancipation proclamation. In public and private statements he used a variety of metaphors to explain his reasons for doing so. "It had got to midsummer 1862," the President later summarized. "Things had gone on from bad to worse, until I felt that we had reached the end of our rope on the plan of operations we had been pursuing; that we had about played our last card, and must change our tactics, or lose the game!"²¹ Both metaphors here—the end of our rope and played our last card—are rather tired, almost dead, and Lincoln also mixes them, but nevertheless the context and the importance of the issue bring them alive and make them work. Lincoln liked the card-playing metaphor; in letters to conserva-

tives who objected to the government's total-war policy of confiscation and emancipation, Lincoln wrote with some asperity that "this government cannot much longer play a game in which it stakes all, and its enemies stake nothing. . . . It may as well be understood, once for all, that I shall not surrender this game leaving any available card unplayed."²²

Lincoln used other, more original and expressive metaphors at the same time, asking one conservative if he expected the government to wage this war "with elder-stalk squirts, charged with rose water." To a Southern Unionist who had complained that emancipation of slaves owned by rebels would inevitably expand into emancipation of slaves owned by loyal Unionists as well, Lincoln replied with an angry letter denouncing those Unionists who did nothing to help the North win the war and who expected the government to take time out to protect their property while it was carrying on a struggle for its very survival. The President spun out a metaphor of a ship in a storm to clinch the point. Do Southern Unionists expect, he asked, "to touch neither a sail nor a pump, but to be merely passengers,—dead-heads at that—to be carried snug and dry, throughout the storm, and safely landed right side up. Nay, more; [is] even a mutineer to go untouched lest these sacred passengers receive an accidental wound?"²³

Lincoln frequently used egg metaphors, and he did so with respect to emancipation and to his subsequent plan of reconstruction. "Broken eggs cannot be mended," he told opponents of his emancipation policy. "I have issued an emancipation proclamation, and I can not retract it." If Southern states wanted to minimize the damage they could withdraw from the Confederacy and return to the Union with their rights intact, "barring the already broken eggs. The sooner [they] do, the smaller will be that which is beyond mending."²⁴

When the constitutionality of his emancipation proclamation

was questioned, Lincoln defended it not only by citing his military powers as commander-in-chief in time of war to seize enemy property used in aid of the war—as slaves certainly were—but he also used an apt metaphor to illustrate how a lesser constitutional right—of property in slaves—might have to be sacrificed in the interests of a greater constitutional duty—that of preserving the nation's life. "Often a limb must be amputated to save a life," Lincoln pointed out in this age without antibiotics in which everyone knew of wounded soldiers who had lost an arm or leg to stop the spread of gangrene or other infections. "The surgeon," Lincoln continued, "is solemnly bound to try to save both life *and* limb; but when the crisis comes, and the limb must be sacrificed as the only chance of saving the life, no honest man will hesitate. . . . In our case, the moment came when I felt that slavery must die that the nation might live!"²⁵

One final metaphor that Lincoln used to illustrate a point about slavery is particularly striking. This one concerned the definition of liberty. The South professed to have seceded and gone to war in defense of its rights and liberties. The chief liberty Southerners believed to be threatened by the election of a Republican president was their right to own slaves. In a public speech in 1864 at Baltimore, in a border slave state where the frictions and abrasions of war had by then just about ground up slavery, Lincoln said: "We all declare for liberty; but in using the same *word* we do not all mean the same *thing*. With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself, and the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labor. . . . The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep's throat, for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as a *liberator*, while the wolf denounces him for the same act as a destroyer of liberty, especially as the sheep was a black one."²⁶ This image leaves no doubt which definition

of liberty Lincoln subscribed to, or whose cause in this war—the Northern shepherd’s or the Southern wolf’s—was the better and nobler one. This passage comes as close to a lyrical expression of Northern purpose as anything could short of poetry.

And at times Lincoln’s words became poetic. He liked to read poetry. His favorites were Burns, Byron, and above all Shakespeare. He knew much of Burns and Shakespeare by heart. As President, Lincoln liked to relax by going to the theater—as we know to our sorrow. He went to every play of Shakespeare’s that came to Washington. He especially enjoyed reading the tragedies and historical plays with a political theme. The quintessence of poetry is imagery, particularly metaphor, and this is true most of all for Shakespeare’s plays. Lincoln’s fondness for this medium undoubtedly helped shape his use of figurative and symbolic language. As a youth he had tried his hand at writing poetry. But the way in which we best know Lincoln as a poet is through several famous passages from his wartime speeches and state papers, in which he achieved unrivalled eloquence through the use of poetic language.

A rather modest example of this occurs in a public letter that Lincoln wrote in August 1863 to be read at a Union rally in Illinois—and of course to be published in all the newspapers. This letter came at a major turning point in the war. The North had recently captured Vicksburg and won the battle of Gettysburg, reversing a year of defeats that had created vitiating doubt and dissent. But even after these victories the antiwar Copperhead movement remained strong and threatening. Its hostility focused mainly on the government’s policy of emancipation and the enlistment of black troops. By the time of Lincoln’s letter several black regiments had already demonstrated their mettle in combat. Lincoln addressed all of these issues. In delightful and easily understood imagery he noted the importance of the capture of Vicksburg in opening the Mississippi River and gave

credit to soldiers and sailors of all regions, including black soldiers and loyal Southern whites, in accomplishing this result. "The signs look better," wrote the President. "The Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea. Thanks to the great North-West for it. Nor yet wholly to them. Three hundred miles up, they met New-England, Empire, Key-Stone, and Jersey, hewing their way right and left. The Sunny South too, in more colors than one, also lent a hand. On the spot, their part of the history was jotted down in black and white. . . . Nor must Uncle Sam's Web-feet be forgotten. . . . Not only on the deep sea, the broad bay, and the rapid river, but also up the narrow muddy bayou, wherever the ground was a little damp, they have been, and made their tracks." Shifting from these cheerful, almost playful images, Lincoln turned to the Copperheads who had been denigrating emancipation and calling the whole war effort a useless and wicked failure. It was not a failure, said Lincoln; the Union had turned the corner toward victory. And when it came, "there will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue, and clenched teeth, and steady eye, and well-poised bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation; while, I fear, there will be some white ones, unable to forget that, with malignant heart, and deceitful speech, they have strove to hinder it."²⁷

Here Lincoln was writing primarily about a *process*—about the means of victory in the war for the Union. It was when he defined the *purpose* of that war—the meaning of Union and why it was worth fighting for—that he soared to his greatest poetic eloquence. "Union" was something of an abstraction that required concrete symbols to make its meaning clear to the people who would have to risk their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor for it. The flag was the most important such symbol. But Lincoln wanted to go beyond the flag and strike deeper symbolic chords of patriotism. And in so doing he furnished

some of the finest examples of poetic metaphor in our national literature.

In the peroration of his first inaugural address, Lincoln appealed to the South with an evocation of the symbols of a common history and shared memories as metaphors for the Union. "We must not be enemies," he declared. "Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."²⁸

Having here summoned forth the past as a metaphor for Union, Lincoln invoked the future in the peroration of his message to Congress in December 1862. Now he added emancipation to Union as the legacy which the people of this generation would leave to their children's children. "Fellow-citizens, *we* cannot escape history. . . . The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. . . . In *giving* freedom to the *slave*, we *assure* freedom to the *free*. . . . We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best, hope of earth."²⁹

Lincoln put these symbolic themes of past, present, and future together in the most famous of his poems, the Gettysburg Address. In this elegy there are no metaphors in a conventional sense; rather there are what one literary scholar has called "concealed" or "structural" metaphors—that is, metaphors that are built into the structure of the address in such a way that they are not visibly obvious but are essential to its meaning.³⁰ The Gettysburg Address contains three parallel sets of three images each that are intricately interwoven: past, present, future; continent, nation, battlefield; and birth, death, rebirth. Let us disaggregate these metaphors for purposes of analysis, even though

in the process we destroy their poetic qualities. Four score and seven years in the *past* our fathers *conceived* and *brought forth* on this *continent* a *nation* that stood for something important in the world: the proposition that all men are created equal. *Now*, our generation faces a great war testing whether such a nation standing for such an ideal can survive. In dedicating the cemetery on this *battlefield*, the living must take inspiration to finish the task that those who lie buried here nobly advanced by giving the last full measure of their devotion. Life and death in this passage have a paradoxical but metaphorical relationship: men died that the nation might live, yet metaphorically the nation itself also died, and with it died the institution of slavery. After these deaths, the nation must have a "new birth of freedom" so that the government of, by, and for the people that our fathers conceived and brought forth in the past "shall not perish from the earth" but be preserved as a legacy for the *future*.³¹

Contrary to common impression, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was not ignored or unappreciated at the time. It is true that admiration for it grew over the years. But many astute contemporaries recognized its merits immediately; one of them was Edward Everett, the main orator of the day, who wrote to Lincoln the next day: "I should be glad, if I could flatter myself, that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes."³²

Despite the qualities of the Gettysburg Address that have deservedly given it pre-eminence in our literature and history as an evocation of the meaning of the Civil War, Lincoln himself considered his Second Inaugural Address his best speech. Again there are no obvious metaphors in the Second Inaugural, but there are structural metaphors that give the whole a profound poetic quality. The phrase about binding up the nation's wounds with malice toward none and charity for all is justly renowned. But as an expression of the meaning of the great sacrifices that

Americans had been called on to make in a war that was now almost over, I think that the penultimate paragraph in Lincoln's Second Inaugural is the best statement. The images there, unlike those in the Gettysburg Address, are Biblical as well as poetic. "American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God . . . He now wills to remove [through] this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came. . . . Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.'"³³

Jefferson Davis did not and could not have written anything like this—or like anything else in the way of images and metaphors that Lincoln used to illustrate his points both great and small. Thus it is not at all difficult for me to concur with David Potter's suggestion that if the Union and Confederacy had exchanged presidents, the North might not have won the Civil War.

NOTES

1. David M. Potter, "Jefferson Davis and the Political Factors in Confederate Defeat," in David Donald, ed., *Why the North Won the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960), pp. 112, 104.

2. Paul D. Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), p. 269.

3. The metaphor can be found in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols., (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955), IV, 433; the exchange between Lincoln and the government printer was recounted in Francis B. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1866), pp. 126-27.

4. Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, III, 546-47.

5. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House*, pp. 312-13.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 235-36, 68.

7. Paul M. Zall, *Abe Lincoln Laughing: Humorous Anecdotes from Original Sources by and about Abraham Lincoln* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 3.

8. Paraphrased from Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House*, pp. 138-39.

9. Quoted in Herbert Joseph Edwards and John Erskine Hankins, *Lincoln the Writer: The Development of His Literary Style* (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1962), p. 26.

10. Keith Jennison, *The Humorous Mr. Lincoln* (New York, Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1965), p. 4.

11. James M. McPherson, *Ordeal By Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), p. 319.

12. Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, VI, 249, 273.

13. Zall, *Abe Lincoln Laughing*, p. 86.

14. Tyler Dennett, ed., *Lincoln and the Civil War in the Diaries and Letters of John Hay* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1939), p. 179.

15. Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative. Red River to Appomattox* (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 864; Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, VII, 499.

16. Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, IV, 18.

17. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House*, pp. 310-11.

18. Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, II, 465-66.
19. *Ibid.*, V, 223.
20. *Ibid.*, V, 318.
21. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House*, pp. 20-21.
22. Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, V, 350, 343.
23. *Ibid.*, V, 345-46.
24. *Ibid.*, V, 350, VI, 48.
25. *Ibid.*, VII, 281; Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House*, pp. 76-77.
26. Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, VII, 301-02.
27. *Ibid.*, VI, 409-10.
28. *Ibid.*, IV, 271.
29. *Ibid.*, V, 537.
30. Edwards and Hankins, *Lincoln the Writer*, p. 89.
31. James Hurt, "All the Living and the Dead: Lincoln's Imagery," *American Literature*, 52 (1980-81), 379.
32. Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, VII, 24-25.
33. *Ibid.*, VIII, 333.

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